Empathy 2.0: Discovering What Matters

“To design with people’s experience in mind we need to better understand what qualities matter to the people we are designing for… Designers need to be more broadly aware of people’s goals, aspirations, rituals and values… To be really useful to design for experience, objective data is not enough. We cannot leap to design ideas from analysis directly nor can we observe people’s thoughts and feelings – their motivations, emotions, mental models, values, priorities, preferences and inner conflicts. Yet we need to integrate these subjective phenomena, for it is these that make up people’s experience and help us as designers to respond.”

– Jane Fulton Suri

Today's class is focused on “integrating subjective phenomena” to build empathy with our users. Explicit focus on empathy-building distinguishes human-centered design from other design approaches. Today we will not solve any problems or generate any solutions. Instead, we’ll tell stories, look at pictures, make inferences, and react to our fellow human beings. We'll use three techniques to show you a range of methods; in the future you can choose to use or expand on those you find to be most helpful.

Activity 1 (45 minutes): Literal User Profiles
With your team build profiles of 3 – 5 actual individuals who your team traveler(s) met over Spring Break. Each profile should include photos (and/or drawings), and a rich, eclectic, comprehensive set of details about each person. Each profile should feature someone who is a potential user, a beneficiary, or somehow related to the problem area you’re focused on. Headline the stories that capture the essence of this individual’s experience of the world.

The team member(s) who did not go to the field should play the role of asking questions and driving for clarity and simplicity of expression, and the team member(s) who went to the field should play the role of answering questions and striving for characterizations that preserve the richness and depth of what they saw in the field.

Activity 2 (30 minutes): User Empathy Map
Choose one of your user profiles to develop more fully. This process will rely both on observed information (the user’s words and actions) and inferences you’ll make about the user’s thoughts and

* With thanks to Griff Coleman of Point Forward
feelings. Transfer the diagram below to one of your white boards and use post-its to fill out the four quadrants, starting with the two on the left.

Activity 3 (30 minutes): Composite Characters
Go back to the 3 – 5 user profiles you constructed during Activity 1 and look for common threads across two or more profiles. Do any commonalities surprise you or contradict conventional wisdom? Do they put a new spin on how you see a user group or lead you to a new insight? Such generalizations can be useful because they push you beyond a traditional demographic segmentation of your market and into a more interesting “psychographic” segmentation. These generalizations form the basis of “composite characters.” Composites can be the foundation of a very compelling point of view, because they are likely to be an interpretation of a user group that is unique to your design team.

For example, IDEO did a project trying to come up with a new snack food for the Chinese market. Many Chinese men they interviewed claimed not to snack at all, but actually they hid food in their drawers at work and snacked in secret. IDEO researchers discovered that users perceived snacking as “un-masculine.” This led to a unique point of view and some interesting design directions (like rice crackers shaped and packaged like expensive cigarettes!). Traditional approaches would have been unlikely to yield the “macho secret snacker” as a user group, but by building composite characters the team was able to gain insight into the underlying attitudes and cultural context that was driving behavior.

Build one or two composite characters based on the themes that emerged across your user profiles. The following list of questions might help you flesh out these characters. Be creative, and don’t be afraid to depart from reality a little – your intuition and the empathy you’ve built so far will be your compass.

Potential questions to ask of your composite character(s):
- Birthplace
- Family composition
- Memorable childhood experience
- Occupation
- Income source and level
- Religion or belief system
- Politics
- Habits
- Best qualities
- Worst faults
- Favorite foods
- Favorite way to spend leisure time
- What makes him/her happy?
- What makes him/her sad?
- What makes him/her angry?
- Who or what does he/she love most?
- Who or what does he/she hate most?
- What is he/she most proud of?
- What is he/she most ashamed of?
- What is his/her secret ambition?
- What is his/her darkest secret?
- What is his/her worst fear?

You might choose to do this activity as individuals instead of as a team, leaving a few minutes to share at the end. Then you’ll have four or five characters in total.